

Isaiah 6

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September 16, 2007

1 Introduction

- This chapter describes a vision given to the prophet in the year in which King Uzziah died (v1). This vision completely changed the life and the ministry direction of the prophet. In this lecture, we examine this vision in order to understand the nature of the prophet's commission¹.
- What kind of a time was it in the year that King Uzziah died?
- If we flip back to 1:1, we learn that Isaiah's office coincides with the reign of four kings in the Southern Kingdom of Judah: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah. During that period, the prophet ministered to Judah, and especially her capital city Jerusalem. What did it feel like to be a prophet in the years of these four kings of Judah?
- The Assyrian empire began a period of military expansion during the last years of the reign of Uzziah, who was also called Azariah (2 Kings 15:1; compare 2 Kings 15:7 with 2 Kings 15:32). Prior to this period, the three weak kings of Assyria provided Israel and Judah 75 years of peace and prosperity. Yet, this peaceful era came to an end with the coronation of the Assyrian king Pul (2 Kings 15:19), also called Tiglath-Pileser III (2 Kings 15:29). The Northern Kingdom Israel was immediately forced to pay tribute to Assyria (2 Kings 15:19–20). In the last year of Uzziah, Assyria invaded Israel, turning a large piece of land north of the Galilean Sea into an Assyrian province.
- Therefore, the three successors of Uzziah mentioned in 1:1 (i.e., Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah) lived in the shadow of an expanding Assyrian empire. In the 6th year of Hezekiah, Samaria the capital city of Israel fell, and the Northern Kingdom was no more. Can you imagine what it was like living in the Southern Kingdom of Judah in those years?
- Consequently, the year when Uzziah died symbolically marks the end of a peaceful and prosperous era. Ahead of Isaiah and Judah were years of darkness.
- Yet, God chose to entrust a commission to His servant in such a time as this.

¹A point of scholarly debate is whether this passage describes the *call* of the prophet, or a special *commissioning* of the prophet long after his first call. As the genre of this passage is more akin to the commissioning scene described by prophet Micaiah (1 Kings 22) than the call of Moses (Exodus 3–4) and Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1), we consider this a special commissioning of Isaiah rather than his first call to be a prophet.

- **Devotional Question:** What kind of an era are you living in? Can you discern if God may be calling you to serve Him exactly in a time of darkness?

2 The Commission (6:1–8)

A vision of His throne.

- Ironically, when a human king died, when everyone recognized the beginning of a darker era, Isaiah saw a vision of God seated in His heavenly throne (v1).
- The language employed here in v1–4 describes a royal court, in which the King is surrounded by ministers waiting in front of Him (v2).
- That the kingship of God is a central theme of this vision is evident from the conclusion of the prophet: “my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty (v5).”
- In a time of darkness, it is easy to have your entire being focused on the power of evil, and forget who really is the Lord of history. Mindful of this human weakness, God disclosed His glory to Isaiah in one of the darkest hours of history, to remind him, to remind us, of the reality hidden behind what seems to be a sea of chaos.
- When is the next time this heavenly court and the praise of “holy, holy, holy” reappear in the Bible? It is in the Book of Revelation (Rev 4), written to the persecuted church of Asia, to remind them of the same vision, a vision of God seated in His heavenly throne in a time of suffering and tribulation.

Holy, holy, holy.

- Isaiah is passionate about the holiness of God (v3). For Isaiah, God is the “Holy One of Israel”.
- Holiness, in the Old Testament, is not only a quality of *moral perfection*. More importantly, and often neglected by us, is that holiness describes the *transcendence* of God.
- **Example:** The vision is clearly situated in a temple setting. Succeeding the role of the tabernacle, the temple is typically understood by Israelites to be the locus of the presence of God (Exodus 40:34–38; 1 Kings 8:10–13). Yet, the vision of Isaiah tells us that the temple barely holds the train of the robe of God (v1)! Clearly, God is much bigger than what our conception of Him.
- **Devotional Question:** The commissioning of Isaiah began with a vision of the sovereign and transcendent God. Similarly, the search of one’s vocation always begins with realizing that something bigger than the world is at work in the world. Do you have a sense of the absolute holiness of God? Do you recognize the trace of His work in this age? Do these bring you to your knees and make you cry, “my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty (v5)”? Such a sense of awe is instrumental to the search of one’s calling.

Confession and forgiveness.

- The vision of the Holy King drove Isaiah to recognize his own sinfulness (uncleanness is an OT synonym to sinfulness).
- “Woe to me!” Verse 5 is the 6th of a series of woes pronounced by Isaiah. While the previous ones were judgments pronounced by the prophet upon Jerusalem (5:8, 11, 18, 20, 21), this woe is pronounced on himself!
- The prophet finally realized that he was but a sinful member of a sinful society.
- **Devotional Question:** As you come to a deeper understanding of God, repent and change your way. The first step of service is to learn to give up a life of lies, and lead a life congruous with your expanded vision of God. Does your vision of God prompt you to say to this world and to yourself, “here is where my hypocrisy ends”?
- God is a graceful God. Here the prophet is forgiven. Yet along with forgiveness always comes cleansing with fire (v6–7). It could be a painful process!

A pledge of service.

- With forgiveness the prophet was invited to take part in the heavenly court. The King offered an opportunity of service, and Isaiah took it (v8).
- A comparison of this passage with Micaiah’s report in 1 Kings 22 suggests that God’s invitation may not even be directed to Isaiah, but rather to the heavenly hosts. Nevertheless, the prophet volunteered!
- A lot of times we think that we have to wait for God to explicitly assign us a task. In reality, God is constantly inviting us to join him in governing this universe. The voice of God is often quiet rather than violent, suggestive rather than coercive. One has to have an attentive ear in order to hear the invitation. And when you do, the right thing to do is to pledge your service.
- **Devotional Question:** Seeking one’s vocation can be a long process, requiring discernment and patience. Yet, when the moment of truth comes, are you willing to take the risk of pledging your service?

Summary. Verses 1–8 describe a paradigmatic framework for worship and service:

1. Praise (v1–4)
2. Confession (v5)
3. Forgiveness (v6–7)
4. Commission (v8)

3 The Message (6:9–13)

- The prophet was told that the message would not be received in a positive way. In fact, hardening will *be* the message itself (v9)! Verse 10 elaborates on this effect.
- The Christian message has from the very beginning been a stumbling block for many. Jesus himself quoted v9 to explain his use of parables (Mark 4:12). As the plot of the Gospel of Mark unfolds, even the disciples are characterized by a subtle allusion to v10 (Mark 8:17–18).
- A similar use of v9–10 can be found in John 12:40.
- We all desire a glorious service, with immediate response and high impact. What if God calls us to serve him humbly, to engage in a service with very low profile?
- The response of the prophet is the understandable distress: “For how long, O Lord?”
- Verses 11–13a make it explicit that there is no clear end to the message of judgment. The message stays unattractive to its audience.
- Some scholars believe that Isaiah wrote down this oracle at his old age as a summary of his ministry. Picture an old prophet. Having strived his whole life to call Judah to repent with no success, the prophet concludes his entire ministry in these words that were given to him by God when he was still young. This is the kind of faithfulness that God demands of us.
- Verse 13b offers a tiny glimpse of hope. Maybe that is the hope held on to by the prophet.
- **Devotional Question:** We tend to have a very rosy picture of service. Are you willing to serve God humbly when there is no applause and no glamor?